

EICKHOFF'S FRESH PERSPECTIVE

By Carter Bainbridge

By his admission, Blue Wahoos pitching coach Jerad Eickhoff did not expect to be in Pensacola when the 2024 baseball season began.

After seven seasons as a right-handed pitcher at the Major League level, Eickhoff began 2023 in an unaffiliated independent league with the Lexington Counter Clocks before the Cleveland Guardians purchased his contract in June. From there, the 33-year-old Eickhoff finished the year with the Triple-A Columbus Clippers - where he sought to continue playing in 2024 - before a conversation with a former coach altered his direction.

"I planned on playing this year and was training like the past 13 years," Eickhoff said. "I had conversations with [Miami Marlins assistant general manager] Gabe Kapler...and he met me at a perfect time."

Gabe Kapler, currently in his first year with the Marlins front office, got to know Eickhoff closely during their time with the Philadelphia Phillies from 2018-19. Kapler served as field manager and watched every outing Eickhoff - then a Phillies starting pitcher - made for two seasons. Once Kapler proposed that Eickhoff transition to coaching, the latter dove into a new chapter of life.

"It was definitely emotional to start talks to become a Marlin...the transition was quick, but the 15-hour drive down by myself in the car is where...things kind of became real, like, 'I guess this means I'm retiring from the playing side,'" Eickhoff said during his introduction in April. "[It's] also exciting because I got to experience so many things in my life and my career that have given me a lot of knowledge."

Fast forward four months into the season, and Eickhoff's leap into coaching has been a striking success.

Eickhoff, whom Blue Wahoos manager Kevin Randel calls "terrific," has overseen one of the season's best Double-A pitching staffs. The man Wahoos players nicknamed "Eick" has quickly become an open book for a young staff and credits former pitching coaches met throughout a 13-season playing career for helping hone a transparent, individualized approach.

"It's drawing on that experience that I had [and] putting out an inviting presence," Eickhoff said. "I hope that every guy feels like they can come to me with questions and pick my brain. For me, no question is a bad question."

Eickhoff's influence has been evident both on the field and in the stat sheet. The Wahoos have climbed steadily above .500 since late April, and their



successful pitching staff has played a large role. As of August 2, Pensacola's 3.59 teamwide earned run average ranks eighth-lowest in Double-A among 30 teams, while its 3.34 bullpen ERA ranks fifth-lowest.

On an individual level, several Pensacola pitchers have improved upon last year or advanced to new career heights. Right-handed starter Evan Fitterer emerged as one of the Southern League's best ground ball inducers en route to his first career Triple-A promotion. Left-handed starter Jonathan Bermúdez returned to Triple-A for the first time since 2022, and righthander M.D. Johnson shaved over two full runs (4.58 to 2.53) from his 2023 Double-A ERA before an early July injury.

Several of those names credit Eickhoff with a personal, relatable approach offered by someone familiar with Major League-level techniques.

"I really enjoyed having Eick as a coach this year," said Fitterer, who has pitched with Triple-A Jacksonville since late June. "He was always more than willing to put in one-on-one time with me. I think he handled the transition from player to coach very naturally."

"He comes in every day trying to help all of us," said Johnson. "He goes about things from both a player and coach side of things, which is a refreshing feeling."

Eickhoff's style meshed particularly well with Johnson, a fifth-year veteran who entered the 2024 season interested in reshaping his arsenal. After the 2023 season saw walks tick up and his four-seam fastball lack effectiveness against Double-A competition, Johnson decided to add a new pitch - a sinker - to show opposing hitters a new look. According to Johnson, Eickhoff's support of the new pitch and a renewed focus on smaller goals have made a positive difference.

"For me, [the goal] was to care less about wins, losses, ERA...and compete against myself, limiting free passes, and committing to throwing the ball at the bottom of the zone as often as I could," Johnson said. "Something that [Eickhoff] has said day in and day out was, 'Let's work on the sinker leading up to the game,'...over the course of the season, the pitch got more and more effective."

The approach paid dividends for Johnson, who earned Southern League Pitcher of the Week honors in early May following a dominant stretch. For Eickhoff, the success is merely a product of his hunger to gain a competitive edge through detailed information and up-to-date data trends to help pitchers like Fitterer, who entered the year focused on improving his command.

"My biggest goal of the season was to limit the amount of walks," Fitterer said. "We did a lot of video review to find what I could be doing better."

Eickhoff credits existing infrastructure within the Marlins' system and new perspectives offered by first-year Marlins front office members such as general manager Peter Bendix and director of player development Rachel Balkovec, who have assisted in the technical focus to optimize individual strengths to developing players. However, a few of Eickhoff's main tenets of personable coaching are deceptively simple and decidedly low-tech.

"For me, I'm trying to develop my ability to connect," Eickhoff said. "How do we take a negative that happens...and how do we change it and present it from a development standpoint in a positive way? It's staying positive at all times. I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy, and I hope the players see that."

An unlikely step outside Eickhoff's comfort zone brought him to coaching and Pensacola for the first time, but the Wahoos have found a new face among their staff who has quickly meshed with a hungry, developing stable of pitchers. The results have been positive not just for the Wahoos in the win-loss column, but for the players and the brand-new coach developing alongside one another to achieve their goals together. ♦

